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# The Difference Between Workplace Equity And Equality, And Why It Matters



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When we hear the word “equity,” it typically comes up in conversations about pay. While compensation is certainly one component of an equitable workplace, the focus on pay and other similar metrics reveals a fundamental misunderstanding of equity’s true definition. In fact, I’ve found people tend to confuse equity with equality — and though they’re only two letters apart, they actually have very different meanings.

These differences go beyond mere semantics. Defining equity in terms of quantifiable results is too narrow and, ultimately, counterproductive because it encourages a focus around outcomes rather than how equitable environments are built and sustained in the first place. Only through understanding the process can organizations begin their journey to establishing a truly equitable workplace.

## Equity And Equality's Relationship To Diversity And Inclusion

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On a fundamental level, equity and equality are both points along a longer continuum of diversity and inclusion. We've heard a lot about diversity and inclusion, mostly in terms of talent attraction, retention and promotion, but we rarely discuss what a truly diverse and inclusive organization looks like from a more holistic, lasting point of view — and that's what equity is.

The first step along the continuum is, unsurprisingly, diversity. As we know, organizations need to attract diverse thought and talent, which is usually accompanied by the kind of diversity you can quantify (think: attracting employees of different ethnic backgrounds, genders and ages at all levels within an organization).

Once diversity in the workforce has been achieved, the next step on the continuum is inclusion. An inclusive work environment is one in which leaders are vocal about encouraging everyone to share their contributions and, when done well, makes employees feel valued through positive reinforcement and clear outcomes.

When *all* employees are empowered and feel empowered to bring their unique thoughts and ideas to the table, they know they're being valued equally — that's equality, the third step along the continuum. If all three of these stages are met, then equity will occur naturally. Equity is more of a state than a step, and it's hard to strictly define what it looks like since it'll be different for every organization. But in general, equity is what happens when all members of a diverse population of employees have equal opportunities and support to succeed and grow.

### How Equity Is Achieved

Equity, as we've learned, is born naturally from establishing a diverse, inclusive and equal workplace. But if you don't feel you have a solid footing in those areas, you may be wondering where you should start.

The best way to approach the process is to work backward. Start by considering what's important to your workforce and what equity would look like to them. This ensures you won't lose sight of your ultimate goal. Again, it shouldn't only be about pay. There are other forms of equity to consider — like learning and development opportunities and opportunities for growth, success and promotion. Even parity in the way projects are divvied up and assigned can go a long way to ensuring equity. Examine all your HR processes through the lens of equity, too: For example, do you offer mentorship programs? Do you provide scholarships for upskilling opportunities and/or cover employees' costs directly? Do you hold managers accountable for income structures and distributing equitable bonuses?

Finally, be sure to communicate your equity goals to the entire leadership team. Securing their buy-in will ensure they'll be able to hold their direct reports, and themselves, accountable for their role in sustaining an equitable workplace.

## Pitfalls Along the Road To Equity

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We've discussed how equity is hard to quantify, but don't let that lull you into taking a loose approach to achieving it. The worst thing an organization can do is make empty promises around equity. Without being able to demonstrate how equity works and point to specific examples of it in your organization, it's a hollow concept that damages trust and only serves to undercut equity in the end.

The other mistake I see organizations make is believing they can skip to the equity stage without first passing through the diversity, inclusion and equality steps of the continuum. If all three are met, then equity occurs naturally, but you need to attain the first three. Take care to build out a realistic timeline for achieving it.

Once you've done so, you and your workforce will experience advantages far beyond the more visible benefits of equity, like better employee engagement, higher retention rates and better business outcomes. Equity is truly the capstone of the journey through diversity, inclusion and equality, and the best part about achieving equity is the unique and intangible sense of community and engagement it creates.

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